



Two Rohingya refugees overlooking Cox's Bazar, the world's biggest refugee camp in Bangladesh.

## Migration and Development

# SOUTH-ASIA REGIONAL PAPER

The Helvetas Migration and Development team is developing regional papers to inform development cooperation for the benefit of migrants and countries alike. These papers add to Helvetas publications on different migration and development related topics (e.g. [Migration and Development: position paper](#), [Across Borders: why we must shape migration](#)).

## THE SOUTH ASIA REGION

This regional South Asian paper on Migration and Development focuses on Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Top destination countries for the bigger group of S-A countries are in the Middle East (ME), namely: Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman but also Malaysia, Japan and South Korea<sup>1</sup>. Migration into, out of and within South Asia is a historical fact and short, medium- and long-term migration has always been there. South Asian countries are source and destination countries and channels for forced displacement and internal migration in addition to economic and labour migration as well as family reunification. South-Asia intra-regional migration by far outweighs other forms of mobility. Actual figures are likely to be larger than official

ones due to the vast undocumented flows of both permanent and circular migration. However, few studies have focused on intra-regional migration and its costs and benefits. Regional migration is often viewed as a (national) security issue endangering socio-political stability especially in the case of refugee populations and it is challenging to tackle it in regional and bilateral discussions as well as policies. This paper builds on other Helvetas publications in the field of Migration and Development: "Migration and Development Guidance Paper" 2019 and "Beyond borders, why migration must be organised", 2018."

<sup>1</sup> To a lesser extent also Jordan and Hong Kong.

## MIGRATION IN SOUTH ASIA

### Main push and pull factors

**Labour migration:** South Asians have been migrating to the Middle East – with a big share in GCC<sup>2</sup> countries – since the early 70ties. According to the Global Migration Data Sheet, looking at country-to-country flows, in 9 out of 20 cases, South Asian countries are countries of origin. **South- and South-east Asians constitute around 15 %<sup>3</sup>** of the total international migrating population, among the highest in the world and the **countries of the Persian Gulf** are the **largest recipients of migrant workers**. The shortage, the poor quality as well as low salaries of **employment** opportunities in South Asian countries coupled with **poverty, debt and gender-based violence** are among the major push factors for labour migration. The GCC countries' economies still experience a **shortage of workers** and are highly dependent on the foreign labour force for skilled and low-skilled employment.

**Forced Migration:** Millions of refugees are forcibly displaced **through conflict** in South-Asia. Among them are stateless Rohingya populations inside and outside of Bangladesh and Myanmar (**IDPs**), but also, Afghan refugees settling in Pakistan (and Iran).

Coming from Sri Lanka Tamil refugees live in India and there are Tibetan refugees and South Bhutaneese in Nepal. Furthermore, one could also count the 'Partition refugees' (people displaced by the partition of India and Pakistan) as previously displaced people. The roughly one million Rohingya in Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh with the majority having entered in 2017 is currently the biggest group of displaced people in South-Asia. Also, hundreds of thousands of people are displaced internally (**IDPs**) by **natural disasters** in South-Asia, e.g. flooding in Bangladesh, earthquakes and landslides in Nepal.

### Internally displaced people South Asia in 2018<sup>4</sup>

Country	Disaster	Conflict
Pakistan	1,800	75,000
Bangladesh	946,000	6,000
Nepal	384,000	
Sri Lanka	135,000	42'000
India	1,346,000	78,000

Change in working-age people needed by 2030 to keep dependency ratio at 2016 level  
As % of current working-age population

Need immigrants 0-10 10-20 20-30 30+ Have excess workers 0-10 10-20 20-30 30+



Sources: United Nations; Taiwan National Development Council  
Economist.com

- 2 The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)
- 3 <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/making-migration-safer-and-more-productive-south-asia> (accessed Nov. 20)
- 4 <http://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2018/downloads/2018-GRID.pdf>

## Development relevance and major issues

**LABOUR MIGRATION:** A unique economy has developed between the Middle East and South Asian nations. South Asian countries are major beneficiaries of foreign exchange inflows and they are among the top twenty countries **receiving maximum amounts of remittances globally**. However, demand for labour from GCC countries decreased in recent years and labour migration from South Asia declined in most South Asian countries. Contrary to this trend, **remittances to South Asia grew around 12 % in 2018<sup>6</sup>** and are likely to hit \$131 billion in 2018 (globally 630 bn). Largest receiver of remittances in South Asia is India with 80 bn. Among the South Asian countries, **Nepal is most dependent on remittances (28% of GDP)** with Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh following with between 8.1% down to 5.4% of GDP. **Remittance sending costs** are on a low regional average of 5.2% for South Asians. Experience in South Asia shows that remittances are predominantly used for consumption and less to increase productive capacity, related to a profound lack of financial literacy (see: Helvetas work in Sri Lanka). The possibility to find work abroad is relieving the South Asian countries of some **pressure to expand their labour market**. At the same time, the inflow of foreign currency is economically important for the source countries, for example for debt services and supports the local market by stimulating consumption and imports.

South Asian migrant workers leave to provide for a better future for their families. At the same time, **South Asian migrants are very vulnerable to mistreatment by employers** and the social costs, like family breakdown, fragmentation of social networks and psychosocial stress as well as health issues during labour migration, are considerable. **Protection of migrant workers** to hinder abuse and exploitation is often overshadowed by promotional efforts of sending countries fostering foreign employment to increase remittances. Malaysia and Saudi Arabia are the **most dangerous places** for South Asians migrant workers<sup>7</sup>. Among the six GCC countries, UAE

5 All figures are from official sources. However, some of the numbers may not mirror the actual situation, e.g. the ones on youth unemployment for Nepal seem rather low.

6 The trend of growing remittances is said by the WB (<https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/05/article/asias-record-remittances-show-globalization-alive-and-well/>) to be "driven by stronger economic conditions in high-income economies (particularly the US) and strong oil prices that had a positive impact on remittance outflows from some GCC countries".

7 [http://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-kathmandu/documents/publication/wcms\\_493777.pdf](http://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-kathmandu/documents/publication/wcms_493777.pdf), <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/india-34000-migrant-workers-have-died-in-the-gulf-since-2014-activists-criticise-lack-of-protections/>

## Basic data on the respective South Asian countries<sup>5</sup>

### Pakistan

Population: 208 Mio  
Youth unemployment: 7.9%  
Trafficking: Tier 2  
Personal remittances received to GDP: 6.8%  
Net-migration: -1,000,000  
Per Capita GDP: USD 1516 (2017)  
total # of refugees received: 1,400,000 (2017)  
total # of refugees outflow: 129,000 (2017)

### Sri Lanka

Population: 20 Mio  
Youth unemployment: 20.9%  
Trafficking: Tier 2  
Personal remittances received to GDP: 8.1%  
Net-migration: -450,000  
Per Capita GDP: USD 4073 (2017)  
total # of refugees received: 1000  
total # of refugees outflow: 115,000 (2013)

### Bangladesh

Population: 158 Mio  
Youth unemployment: 4.3%  
Trafficking: Tier 2  
Personal remittances received to GDP: 5.4%  
Net-migration: -2,400,000  
Per Capita GDP: USD 1516 (2017)  
total # of refugees received: 932,000 (2013)  
total # of refugees outflow: 16,000 (2013).

### Nepal

Population: 29 Mio  
Youth unemployment: 4.3%  
Trafficking Tier: 2  
Personal remittances received to GDP: 28%  
Net-migration: -350,000  
Per Capita GDP: USD 849 (2017)  
total # of refugees received: 21,000 (2017)  
total # of refugees outflow: 8,400 (2017)

### India

Population: 1.36 Billion  
Youth unemployment: 10.6%  
Trafficking: Tier 2  
Personal remittances received to GDP: 2.9%  
Net-migration: -2,400,000  
Per Capita GDP: USD 1979 (2017)  
total # of refugees received: 197,000 (2018)  
total # of refugees outflow: 7,900 (2018)

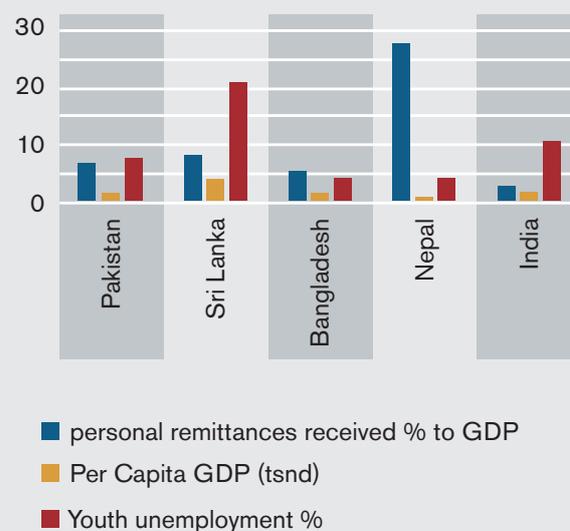
Sources: The Flow of People: [http://download.gsb.bund.de/BIB/global\\_flow/](http://download.gsb.bund.de/BIB/global_flow/), International Labor migration statistics in South Asia, ILO 2018, Migration data portal: [https://migrationdataportal.org/data?i=stock\\_perc\\_&t=2017&cm49=418](https://migrationdataportal.org/data?i=stock_perc_&t=2017&cm49=418)

is the least dangerous with a death rate of one in 638 workers and 72 deaths for every \$1 billion remitted<sup>8</sup>. **The recruitment industry – including formal recruitment agencies and informal middlemen – is thriving** in most South Asian countries and is a considerable player, and source of challenges in the labour migration value chain (see: Helvetas Sri Lanka Policy Brief on recruitment and ILO fair recruitment and the IOM ethical recruitment initiatives).

**INTERNAL MIGRATION:** While exact numbers are difficult to obtain<sup>9</sup>, **rural-urban** migration for economic reasons is increasing in most South Asian countries, particularly in India and Bangladesh and is characterized by growing settlements in coastal areas and expanding **urbanization**. South Asians often migrate internally in a seasonal and circular manner, while seasonal migrants are likely to be from poorer households, than permanent ones. Some countries also see a sharp increase internal mobility in the **context of environmental degradation and climate change**, which act as threat multipliers, for example in Bangladesh. Growing disparities between livelihoods of rural and urban environments and the depletion of productive resources accelerate the trend. **Gradual movement due to slow onset disasters** is usually seen as voluntary. But for this type of displacement from the original settlements – within or across borders – the line to forced **displacement** is blurred. Also, internal migrants with low skills tend to have little understanding about the labour market, have no access to networks or are depending on intermediaries. They therefore end up at the lower end of the labour market and suffer from vulnerabilities and deprivation. However, circular migration can also be seen to bear potential to foster development and reduce poverty in rural communities, by generating remittances, investments in local communities and bringing back new ideas and therefore transferring some of the economic growth from the cities to the countryside.

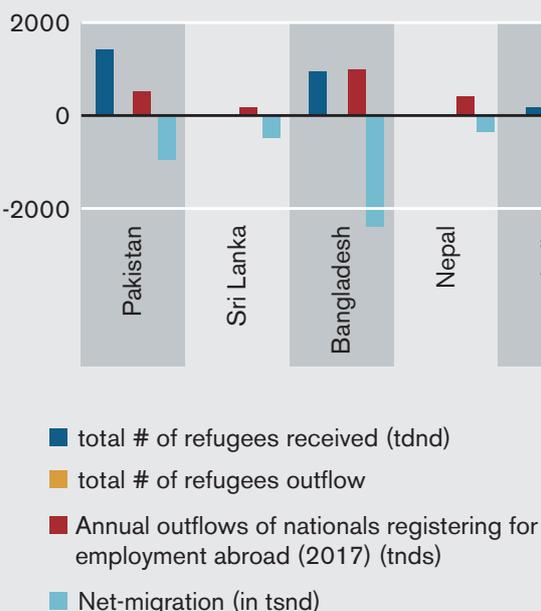
**FORCED MIGRATION:** Forced displacement through natural disasters is a main cause for **internal migration, internal displacement and urbanization** in South Asia (e.g. Bangladesh and Myanmar). Conflict related forced displacement on the other hand leads to major **political problems** for host communities and poses high **risks for social cohesion** between and among host communities and the displaced (e.g. Cox’s Bazar). Furthermore, there is a significant amount of **trafficking beyond and within countries** in South-Asia, which is often voluntary at the initial stage (except in the case of forced mar-

### South Asia: Remittances, GDP and Youth unemployment



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### Migration and Population movements



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8 [https://www.ilo.org/newdelhi/whatwedo/publications/WCMS\\_645286/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/newdelhi/whatwedo/publications/WCMS_645286/lang-en/index.htm)

9 International migration receives much attention in policy discussions, although internal mobility is a more significant livelihood strategy. Unfortunately, internal migration is excluded from migration statistics and countries use a variety of definitions if at all these movement are captured; hence numbers are difficult to compare.



SAMI Nepal community theatre to create awareness on what to expect in the Middle East

riage) but based on deceit and often leading to **forced labour and modern slavery**. Irregular migration is very high between India and Pakistan, Bangladesh and India (some of it is trafficking), Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as Pakistan and India, leaving people vulnerable to exploitative practices. Information on trafficking is generally difficult to obtain, but according to the scarce sources from Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan<sup>10</sup>, female victims in this sub-region account for roughly 60% per cent of the total detected victims and special emphasis must be given to children on the move. South Asian male construction workers are also often finding themselves in slave-like working situations<sup>11</sup>. Especially in conflict affected situations, data about trafficking and modern slavery<sup>12</sup> are hard to obtain.

### Main stakeholders and legal frameworks

- **Relevant regional organisations:** SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council).
- **Relevant regional players:** ILO, IOM, UNESCAP, MFA (Migrant Forum Asia), CARAM Asia, UNIFEM, UNWOMEN, UNDOC.
- **Relevant INGOs:** The Asia Foundation, Open Society Foundation, Solidarity Centre, CARITAS, Walk free foundation, Free the Slaves, anti-slavery.
- **Relevant regional processes and conventions:** Colombo Process (CP), Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD), SAARC Social Charter, SAARC Convention on Prevention and Combating Trafficking of Women and Children for Prostitution, ILO Conventions 97, 143, 181, 198. Numerous bilateral agreements between CoO and CoD.
- **Relevant national organisations:** Local NGOs as well as Trade Unions supporting Migrants.
- **Relevant private sector and informal actors:** Intermediaries: Formal and registered recruitment agencies in the CoO and CoD<sup>13</sup>. Informal and irregular, often part-time intermediaries, directly in contact with the migrant. Possible employers of returnees. Financial players, providing loans to prospective migrants. Private training centres for migrants. Private service providers: Health centres providing required health certificates. Transportation and accommodation services for departing migrants.
- **Migration Governance & Relevant Policies:** Sri Lanka: National Labour Migration Policy (2008), Foreign Employment Bureau Act No 21 of 1985; Nepal: Foreign Employment Act 2007; Bangladesh: Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013, Bangladesh Overseas Employment Policy,

10 <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/data-and-analysis/glotip.html>

11 An estimated 80'000 irregular Bangladeshi migrants work in the Maldives.

12 Bonded labour, forced labour, debt bondage, domestic servitude, sexual exploitation (trafficking), labour exploitation (trafficking), child labour, child- or forced marriage.

13 CoD: Country of Destination, CoO: Country of Origin



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Women in Sri Lanka holding a rally on International Migrants Day

2006, Wage Earners' Welfare Fund; India: Emigration Act of 1983; Pakistan: The Emigration Ordinance of 1979.

- **Respective labour migration departments:** **Sri Lanka:** Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare; **Nepal:** Department of Foreign Employment; **Bangladesh:** Umbrella Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET); **India:** Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA), Overseas Workers Resource Centres; **Pakistan:** Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE).

In some countries, staff of the respective departments is deployed down to the regional/provincial or district level and other services such as shelters, child protection or trafficking units are connected.

- **Middle Eastern migration and labour regulations:** Most ME governments have strict labour migration rules and regulations based on the Kafala sponsorship system, which binds the work permit to the employer and means that the worker is at the mercy of the employer/sponsor. However, change is happening; in August 2020, Qatar<sup>14</sup> has abandoned the Kafala system and introduced a minimum wage for the Qatar labour market, which also benefits labour migrants.

### Perspectives for an M&D engagement in South Asia

In the South Asian – GCC corridor, it is the South Asian countries who are in a difficult situation to protect their migrant workers (MW), due to lack of negotiation power as well as a lack of political will. The GCC countries who need the south Asian workers, still largely rely on the **Kafala** system which allows employers to exploit MW and releases the destination countries from taking responsibility for the (labour) rights of MW. **Labour migration policies** exist in all sending countries, but most policies and laws would benefit from being revised and they are generally not rigorously implemented. There are long and winding value-chains involving numerous players who are benefitting from the current practice (especially the intermediaries). At the same time all sending countries know gender discriminatory regulations and practices during the recruitment process (e.g. **Family Background Report** in Sri Lanka), which are hardly addressed. South Asian countries are also under pressure to export some excess labour and at the same time they lack the negotiation power in bilateral agreements with GCC countries. Hence, bilateral agreements are currently rather a way to formalize a migration channel than a tool to protect migrants. This leads to a situation where GCC countries are still able to shift from one South Asian – and

14 [https://www.ilo.org/beirut/projects/qatar-office/WCMS\\_754391/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/beirut/projects/qatar-office/WCMS_754391/lang-en/index.htm)

increasingly African – sending country to the next, should the sending country demand better conditions like higher salaries and better social protection. Despite similar problems, South Asian countries have failed to collectively negotiate better conditions. At the same time, the **protection needs in the receiving countries are still considerable** and cannot be covered by the diplomatic missions in the GCC countries. Challenges and strategies to **link migration to development and to increase benefits of migration** (e.g. increased skilling for migration and for reintegration, financial literacy, support for entrepreneurs) have not been taken up seriously by CoO.

The still massive **skills mismatch** between the sending countries and the receiving countries (e.g. supply and demand in the labour market) contributes to the lack of development benefits due to migration. The impression remains, that sending countries appreciate migrants mainly as remittance and foreign exchange earners.

Civil society organisations in sending and receiving countries are the key entities advocating for the rights of migrants. In some countries organisations who work on behalf of migrants are well organised and numerous, in others they are weak. However, considering the highly **complex needs in protecting migrant workers and making sure that labour migration benefits the migrants and their families** the challenges are still huge.

The **role of the private sector** as employer, service provider (e.g. finance, education, communication), recruiter or investor has also gained traction and entry points to work on the role of the private sector for **labour migration and forced displacement** situations are currently discussed<sup>15</sup>. Helvetas' experience in South Asia as well as ILO Fair Recruitment initiative point to a potentially growing role of unscrupulous employment agencies and informal labour intermediaries acting outside the legal and regulatory frameworks.

To maximize the potential of **internal migrants**, inclusive urbanization models and integrated as well as proactive labour-market provisions, it is necessary to emphasize education, skills development and career counselling as well as information to prepare the

(young) labour force. In most South Asian countries, however, this is still largely missing. **Rural-urban mobility** is hence one of the topics on which Helvetas seeks to enhance its contributions and create a link to **urban engagement**.

Regarding **trafficking beyond and within countries**, most people ending up in forced/bonded labour or sex slavery situations, depart in the search for work to send back remittances and are lured by bogus work programs or recruitment agents/agencies. The refugee camps, particularly the huge Rohingya camps are major sources of victims and Covid-19 has accelerated coercive departure and kidnapping, often resulting in trafficking. The South Asian region is highly affected by the phenomenon, but the respective Governments and NGOs are unable to keep track of the problem and SAARC has been unable to address the issue adequately<sup>16</sup>, despite the fact that the Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution (2002) has been signed by its members.

**Durable solutions** (Voluntary Repatriation, Resettlement, Complementary Pathways and Local Integration/Solutions) for protracted international and internal displacement situations have been discussed intensively in the context of upscaled IDP protection as well as the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)<sup>17</sup> and remains high on the agenda. In these contexts, **social cohesion between and within migrants/refugees' groups<sup>18</sup> and host communities**, is a huge issue for South Asia, particularly, but not exclusively for the Rohingya in Bangladesh.

**DECISION-MAKING/PRE-DEPARTURE STAGE:** For **labour migration**, the main challenges are still in the area of empowering labour migrants to take informed decisions, recruitment, skilling and capacity building (e.g. FinLit) for better job placements and increase understanding on the gendered nature of the migration experience. For **internal migration** it is the support for unskilled internal labour migrants to realize labour rights, fostering access to information and networks for enhanced support structures. For the issue of **forced migration**, particularly in the case of environmental migration creating spaces for informed local discussions on the challenges and options related to human mobility and environmental changes,

<sup>15</sup> <https://ecdpm.org/publications/mapping-private-sector-engagement-migration-cycle/>

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/newdelhi/whatwedo/publications/WCMS\\_251026/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/newdelhi/whatwedo/publications/WCMS_251026/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>17</sup> <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/GRF%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Solutions.pdf> and [https://www.europe.undp.org/content/geneva/en/home/library/crisis\\_prevention\\_and\\_recovery/durable-solutions-in-practice.html](https://www.europe.undp.org/content/geneva/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/durable-solutions-in-practice.html)

<sup>18</sup> E.g. see: <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/bulletin-rohingya-and-host-communities-social-cohesion-june-2019>, <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/959-.html>,



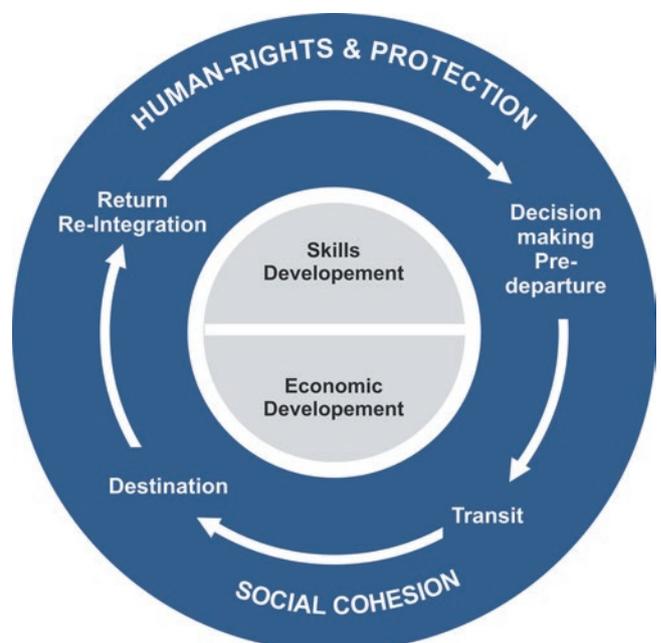
Nepalese migrants queue outside a passport office

information and skilling for suitable labour migration options, work on climate services.

**TRANSIT AND DESTINATION STAGE:** In the case of **labour migrants**, provide left behind families with suitable support: e.g. financial literacy, increased policy work in the framework of Abu Dhabi Dialogue and Colombo Process, better insights into implementation of legal frameworks in CoD's, monitoring of harmonization of regulations between CoO and CoD -particularly fair/ethical recruitment, remittance transfer, post arrival trainings, capacity building for migrants in the CoD, legal aid for migrants in CoD, labour rights in CoD's, work with recruitment actors in the CoD are important issues. For **forced migration situations**, access to basic services and specific protection issues, creating space for joint activities or facilities, dialogue and discussions on challenges like competition in the job market and education issues should be high on the agenda. For **environmental migration** fostering networks and specific information on environmental push factors and labour migration options, develop suitable and evidence based policy recommendations for governments to tackle the challenges are pertinent issues.

**RETURN RE-INTEGRATION STAGE:** In the case of **labour migration**, skills matching, job placement and/or funding support for enterprise development, social reintegration and social benefits, the recognition of prior learning and develop fact-based advoca-

cy strategies to ensure international and domestic migrants' rights are pivotal. Exploring the issue of durable solutions for **forced migration** situations for all displaced men and women are important for the transit and the "return" stage. Enhancing access to psychosocial counselling for those in need of assistance could be upscaled for **all returnees or those resettled**.





Soni Kumri Bomjan, age 28, collects vegetable at Hariwon village in Sarlahi district, Nepal

## Thematic and project experiences

**Labour Migration:** Sri Lanka (LMP SL), Bangladesh (SIMS) and Nepal (SaMi). Extensive experience in labour migration (since 2010, ongoing). Donor: SDC SC and GPMD

**Labour Migration and Skills for Reintegration:** Bangladesh: Skills and Migration (in the framework of ILO Skills21 programme), Donor: ILO

**Labour Migration and Market System Development:** Nepal ELAM project. Supporting migrants' families and returnees creating their own business (productive use of remittances), Donor: Kanton Zürich, own funds

**Migration and Environmental Degradation/Climate Change:** Bangladesh. Pani Jibon, Donor: Climate Justice Resilience Fund

**Trafficking:** Sri Lanka. Equipping Sri Lanka to Counter Trafficking in Persons (EQUIP), Donor: US DOS

**M&D in HumResp/protection & social cohesion:** Bangladesh, Cox Bazar. Extensive governance and participation exploration and proposal to IOM on social cohesion, working with host communities, Donor: UNHCR, IOM

**Rural/urban migration:** Myanmar. ACTE Project focusing on rural-urban migration for work in Yangon's thriving garment industry  
Donor: LIFT



**HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation**  
Weinbergstrasse 22a, Postfach, 8021 Zürich  
Telefon +41 44 368 65 00, helvetas.org  
Postkonto: 80-3130-4  
IBAN CH76 0900 0000 8000 3130 4

